DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 753 CE 082 888

AUTHOR Demetrion, George
TITLE A Yankee Individualist in Dialogue and Confrontation with the Progressive Literacy Left.
PUB DATE 1999-06-00
NOTE 32p.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.crec.org/atdn/teacher_resources/practresearch.pdf .
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Persistence; *Adult Educators; *Adult Learning; Definitions; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Research; Essays; *Literacy Education; Personal Narratives; *Research Problems; Research Projects; School Holding Power; Student Motivation; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Researchers; Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Literacy Volunteers of America Inc

ABSTRACT

This document presents the personal narrative of an adult literacy practitioner who has worked with Literacy Volunteers of America and a reading center in Connecticut and who signed up for the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) Teacher Research Project on Learner Motivation, Retention, and Persistence in 1998. The narrative focuses on why the teacher researcher's involvement in the NCSALL project proved problematic. The following issues are discussed in detail: (1) the problems stemming from the fact that the teacher researcher and his project-designated facilitator each had very different understandings of the concept of teacher research; (2) the difficulties arising from the impracticality of the researcher's initially selected topic from the standpoint of implementation as part of the NCSALL project; (3) the motivation problems encountered by the teacher researcher because of the fact that, although the NCSALL project's areas of focus were important to his reading center's program, they were not the areas of focus most central to meeting the reading center's goals. The essay concludes by raising the issue of whether an individual teacher researcher has the right to challenge the operative assumptions of the NCSALL project designers and transform their purposes for the project. (Contains 15 references.) (MN)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 461 753

# A Yankee Individualist in Dialogue and Confrontation with the Progressive Literacy Left

George Demetrion

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G. Demetrion

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)



CE 082 888

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

**A Yankee Individualist in Dialogue and Confrontation with the Progressive Literacy Left**

George Demetrion
Literacy Volunteers of America—Connecticut River East
NCSALL Teacher Research Project
June 1999

**Abstract**

In the summer of 1998, two colleagues and I signed up for the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) Teacher Research Project on Learner Motivation, Retention, and Persistence. That project proved problematic, although highly significant for me, from the beginning of my participation. Several factors intersected that created this "problem." These included my understanding of teacher research, which differed somewhat from the facilitator's and the impracticality of my initial topic. Lack of any compelling attachment to the NCSALL project was the underlying motivational issue that limited my participation. This essay mirrors the initial NCSALL objective through an autobiographical study of one adult learner's struggle with motivation through the course of the project.

> Learners, as consumers of service, directly or indirectly assess the cost-benefit ratio of their program participation every time they attend or do not attend classes/tutoring sessions. They judge whether the program is (1) meeting their expectations (realistic or unrealistic as their expectations may be); (2) helping them learn, or (3) helping them attain a better quality of life. When the costs of participation outweigh the benefits, [formal, or institutional] education loses its priority in their lives (Tracy-Mumford, 1994, p.4).

> It became obvious that in each of the novels and short stories, the protagonist's resistance to school was more than just a rejection of school....it was a positive quest for freedom that each protagonist undertook with absolute conviction and, in some cases, with risk to reputation and even to life. In their eyes, resistance to school meant a determination to stay true to the beliefs and values of their own culture, their own race, or their religious heritage. Instead of conforming to what they saw as the spurious values promoted by schooling, they resisted authority as they saw it. The protagonists were seeking to gain the liberty...to follow a culture, value system, or lifestyle that they held to be superior to that of the school (Quigley, 1997, p. 201).

> Throughout my adult life, I have persistently linked intellectual development with my on-going quest for personal identity....Without the formal and informal study of history, social theory, psychology, and religious studies, particularly, as profound pathways to my life-project search for meaning, in all likelihood, I would have merely personalized "adjustment" issues without a vivid regard for their varied contexts. Circuitously or directly, much of my intellectual activity has resonated with a desire either to probe into a deeply rooted personal issue or to make an effective connection between an object of study and my own subjective experience....This propensity has served as an inner guide to keep research areas stimulating and relevant. At times this has meshed well with the challenges and requirements of formal academic institutions, although my relationship to

CE 080 730

them has proven characteristically problematical (Demetrion, 1995, pp. 94-95).

**Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge**

My understanding of teacher research stems from the "foundational" work of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993). The primary assumption that drives my understanding of this emerging field is the claim by the authors that:

> The unique feature of the questions that prompt teacher research is that they emanate from neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the two (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993, p. 15).

The authors privilege neither theory nor practice, but point out the importance of their intersection in the resolution of problems or in the explanation of wonderment as determined by teachers, themselves, regardless of their background. Cochran-Smith and Lytle do not necessarily equate theory with academic insight, but neither do they preclude it. Thus, they pitch a wide tent under the rubric of teacher research even as they clearly differentiate it from formal academic research. Moreover, teacher research *could* be represented as academic research depending on the background of the practitioner and the purpose of the project.

The authors identify a key factor that separates teacher research from traditional academic research on teaching. University research on teaching:

> Generally emerg[es] from study in a discipline (or multiple disciplines) and/or analysis of theoretical and empirical literatures; referenced to the major work in some area(s) of the field (p. 12).

Teacher research:

> Generally emerg[es] from problems of practice: felt discrepancies between intention and reality, theory/research and practice; reflective and referenced to the immediate context (p. 12).

This definition is correlated with the methodological quest for "systematic and intentional

inquiry" (p. 7) by practitioners rather than a more academic demand for anything so formal, for example, as "triangulation," which *could*, although does not necessarily need, to be incorporated into teacher research. Rather, the authors desire to leave scope for more inclusive methodologies that resonate with the backgrounds of teacher researchers through the general guiding principle of "systematic, intentional inquiry." As Shirley P. Brown, one of the teacher researchers who contributed to **Inside/Outside** put it, quoting Berthoff (1987), teachers "do not [necessarily] need new information. We need to think about the information we have. We need to interpret that information and in turn interpret our interpretations" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993, p 250). This essay is an effort in such an exercise.

> Some years ago, the educational philosopher John Dewey, argued similarly:
>
> Fewer subjects and fewer facts and more responsibility for thinking the material of those subjects and facts through to realize what they involve would give better results. To carry something through to completion is the real meaning of thoroughness, and power to carry a thing through to its end or conclusion is dependent upon the existence of the attitude of intellectual responsibility (Dewey, cited in Archambault, 1964, p. 227).

Other than the core principle of the intersection of theory (not necessarily academic) and practice in the identification of problems or issues raised by teacher themselves through the methodological principle of "systematic, intentional inquiry," Cochran-Smith and Lytle do not place extensive definitional restrictions on what counts as teacher research. Such "openness" provides considerable space for a wide plurality of expressions, from the highly subjective and idiosyncratic to more formal articulations of teacher research that share close affinities with academic research.

My own expression of teacher research consists of a blending of the highly personal with the academic, clearly, a "blurred genre," to use the term of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, a place where I have found my "voice." Much of my struggle with the NCSALL Practitioner

Research Staff Development project, particularly after my initial topic dissolved, revolved around the conflict between my understanding of teacher research and the facilitator's (Judy's) expectations, based on a more "data" driven conception grounded in a social science perspective. Judy hoped that I could move outside the zone of my comfort level as she was defining that, and "muck around with real data," although I had no particular inclination to move in such a direction that I found neither "empowering" nor particularly interesting.

I have previously written much about my experience as a practitioner through a strong theoretical lens, and my published essays have emerged out of a certain passage of time that has enabled me to obtain a more holistic grasp of my subject matter. I muck around with data daily as a hands-on executive director of an adult literacy program and subject much of it to critical scrutiny in the effort to work out specific problems or programmatic directions. However, little of what I do on a daily basis in my *current* position rises for me to the level of what I would refer to as research, practitioner-focused or otherwise.

For my own practice of teacher research, I have drawn on the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey to interpret the phenomenon of adult literacy at the Bob Steele Reading Center, a site-based, LVA small group tutoring program, in Hartford, CT where I served as its program manager for eight years. In coming to terms with the experience of the Reading Center, I had always drawn in part on academic knowledge, particularly social philosophy and educational theory, to think through what I observed and attempted to establish on site. There was nothing new in this approach for me. I had always attempted to interpret my life-experience either through academic, religious (primarily theological), or at least some theoretical insight which I have encapsulated in an unpublished autobiography titled **Passages Through the Stream of Time: A Boomer's Quest for Self-Realization, Community, and the Kingdom of God**

(Demetrion, 1995).

Arguably such efforts represent, in part, a form of rationalization, an escape valve against pressing existential problems of a highly emotive nature. Yet given a general human capacity to establish perspective from the immediacy of experience, such "distancing" is often life enhancing. A variety of means are available. For me, academic insight has served as a major resource and literacy itself has become a primary metaphor in my life quest for meaning making. In my work with adult literacy learners I have little interest in "passing on" academic knowledge. Rather, I desire to help students make connections between literacy and *their* life passions; mine being linked to the probing quest of academic insight, particularly in the humanities and theological studies, in some ways obliquely, in other ways more directly connected, to my evolving life experience. This is the sensibility I brought when I became the manager of the Bob Steele Reading Center in 1987.

When I read **Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge**, a revelation of sorts took place that what I had been attempting to do in interfacing academic insight with experiential learning, had a name. Cochran-Smith and Lytle did not invent the field of teacher research, but their work was a landmark text in bringing its importance to the fore for adult literacy education. Their intent was to bring legitimacy both to the critical practice and theoretical understanding of classroom teachers on par with university professors and to chart out a framework for the development of this very emergent sub-field of educational research. The authors make an important point that:

> ...we are not arguing that teacher research ought to occupy a privileged position in relation to research on teaching. Rather, we are suggesting the exploration of the issues that divide research on teaching and teacher research may help raise critical questions about the nature of knowledge for teaching and hence enhance research for both communities" (p. 22).

The exploration of this intersection within the context of specific field-based issues, has been the consuming passion of my professional writing on adult literacy education. I am not arguing that my particular brand of teacher research should define the field, or that it is even one of its major highways. I contend, however, that what I have written, including my more theoretical observations, and this historical essay be acknowledged by the teacher research community as among its forms through which I attempt to address some of the key issues raised by Cochran-Smith and Lytle.

**The Context: Signing Up for the NCSALL Teacher Research Project on Motivation, Retention, and Persistence**

I work as the Executive Director of the Literacy Volunteers of America-Connecticut River East (LVA-CRE), a program which serves approximately 100 students in Basic Literacy and English for Speakers of Other Languages through volunteer tutors in one-to-one and small group instructional settings. A special feature of the LVA-CRE program is the availability of the Larson Community Center located in the low-income residential community of Mayberry Village in East Hartford. Staff supported site-based tutoring enables our program to extend beyond the traditional one-to-one LVA model where students and tutors meet as isolated dyads with little or no direct connection with the program, what I sometimes refer to as "John and Millie at the library." The Larson Center provides a climate to enable our agency to develop innovative programming in small group instruction and curriculum revitalization through on-site support of staff. I seek to realize something of the "full potential" of this learning site through the creation of an environment somewhat analogous to what we developed at the Bob Steele Reading Center in the early 1990s. In Hartford we established an extensive small group tutoring program that also featured the creation of student anthologies of writing, oral histories, and an

experimental college intern program.

For several years LVA-CRE had been the major beneficiary of a federal grant that has covered approximately one-quarter of the agency's annual budget and paid for the rent of the Larson Center. Through 1998, these grants were not particularly competitive. That changed for the fiscal year 1998-1999 as only five of the fifteen applicants received the $25,000 grants. In order to be competitive I had to write a very strong proposal. Historically, LVA-CRE's granted project included a pronounced community outreach focus, which I maintained in the new proposal. Most of the grant proposals would include such initiatives, so I figured the community focus in-itself would not make us competitive. The curriculum initiative that I developed drew upon the National Institute for Literacy's Equipped for the Future (EFF) project and the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) mandated by our state's Bureau of Career and Adult Education. It was this, I reasoned, that could provide us with the competitive edge to gain the Gateway Housing grant.

As spelled out in the grant proposal, we would draw on both frameworks to develop an instructional program piloted in three LVA small groups and two Adult Basic Education (including one ESL) classrooms. Since each framework provided considerable scope for individual adaptation, I thought the merged curriculum would allow for considerable flexibility in response to the contingencies of our local context.

We placed an instructor training component into the grant proposal that included participation in the NCSALL Staff Development project. I did not possess a fully clear understanding of how the NCSALL project would add value to the project. The NCSALL Project was geared toward assessing divergent approaches to staff development through a topical focus on learner motivation, retention, and persistence; issues that were important to our

program, but not necessarily what we needed to concentrate on most to realize our own project goals. I figured at the least, participation in the NCSALL project would lend legitimacy to our grant application and that much could come out of it that might benefit our instructors, which would, in any event, *indirectly* impact on the project.

I would participate in the teacher research track because of my interest in that emerging field, clearly on my interpretation, stemming from Cochran-Smith's and Lytle's (1993) "founding" work, and would focus my participation on the overall project management of the grant. My reach extended considerably beyond my grasp in linking our local project to the NCSALL initiative. However, I did desire to complete a teacher research project of significant proportions in my own inimitable style, merging experience and academic insight that would mirror and bring out some of the deeper implications of our local curriculum project.

I learned about NCSALL while working as Director of Materials Development at LVA national and was pleased that an adult literacy think tank was associated with the Harvard School of Education. Given the prestige and intellectual heritage of that bastion of Ivy League liberal humanism, my hope was that the new research focus would prove anything but pedestrian. Specifically, I hoped it would push linkages between academic insight and experiential learning that had not developed to the degree I would have liked at the National Center for Adult Literacy (NCAL). I could visualize how the NCSALL Staff Development Project on Learner Motivation, Retention, and Persistence could benefit our local EFF/CASAS project, but only if the latter were sufficiently developed, which I suspected would not likely be the case. We could only accomplish so much within one year and perhaps only lay the groundwork for the kind of comprehensive curriculum and assessment system that properly should take several years of development.

Still, I wanted to make the connection with the NCSALL project. I thought the linkage would buttress the marketability of the grant proposal whether or not it would enhance the project. I also wanted to strengthen our institutional ties with the Adult Training and Development Network (ATDN) which sponsored the NCSALL Staff Development Project. Moreover, I thought that the instructors I sent to participate, and I, would gain something from the connection with the NCSALL project that could have significant spillover on our local project, but I was unclear how this might unfold. So much seemed uncertain, but I saw little to lose and much to gain in drawing on the NCSALL initiative for our own local project.

**The CASAS/EFF Project**

Notwithstanding certain conceptual differences between CASAS "competencies" based on the mastery of literacy "tasks" and EFF "standards" embedded within the context of literacy "practices," our planning team, which consisted of the East Hartford ABE program facilitator, a staff member of ATDN, and I, created our own local framework. This included a specific content focus that highlighted five general topics drawn from EFF and CASAS, more or less supported by a compendium of materials. We then created a model for a lesson plan that included linking the materials content to one or more of the four purposes of adult education identified by EFF (access, voice, independent action, bridge to the future, Stein, 1997, p. 7), critical thinking, communication, and basic literacy skill development. With that general framework set, we would encourage instructors also to draw on the EFF Common Activities, Generative Skills, and Knowledge Domains, but assumed that such appropriation of the more subtle aspects of the EFF framework would be a slow work that would take the full year to work out. Finally, we developed a student interest survey based on the core topics of what we initially referred to, as an "integrated life-skills curriculum." Through staff development training,

handouts, and intensive one-to-one coaching with instructors, we hoped by the end of the project year to have developed a well-crafted pilot model that we could refine in following years. By the end of the grant period, a more viable direction had emerged, but during the fall of 1998 I was very unsatisfied with the initial implementation stage.

For one thing, the cooperating ABE director was convinced that we would only recruit students if we called the ABE class to be held at the Larson Center, a pre-GED group. In fact, he instructed the teacher to set up the classroom sessions according to the subject categories of the GED so that math would be taught on Monday, social studies and science on Tuesday, and reading and writing on Wednesdays.

The teacher, hired by the ABE director, but assigned to our project, rightly, did not want to get caught into a conflict between the ABE director, who hired her, and me. Moreover, she had a strong affinity for highly structured materials like the GED prep book and at first did not seem to understand the life-skills curriculum we had developed even with the perhaps too voluminous instructional materials we made available. When stuck, she perpetually taught to her strength, which was math, a subject that had little bearing within our curriculum except as it might be contextualized within its various topics.

I spent several sessions with her going over various handouts on the project we created, including the two thick notebooks of instructional materials. I taught the class on several occasions, which she observed. She conceptually grasped what I was aiming at, but felt that her more "traditional" teaching style could not readily assimilate a dialogical and highly content focused approach that I felt was required to effectively implement the curriculum. Her reliance on math became more and more pervasive as the semester wore on, although she did occasionally draw on the curriculum focus and became much more in tuned with our curriculum

focus in the second semester.

By the time that I began my participation in the NCSALL project in October 1998, I felt that the project was in too loose of a shape to focus on for a teacher research assignment. In attempting to work through the project, I would exert considerable critical thought, but for the purpose of salvaging it, particularly for the second semester. I did not want to add an additional encumbrance that I felt the NCSALL focus would require. This may be in part due to my understanding of the gap between critical practice and teacher research. While the two are often linked, I encounter many situations that call for critical practice and hence, reflection. Most of those situations I do not take to the level of research that requires additional distancing which may or may not prove efficacious for the resolution of or understanding of a particular problem. At some time, I very well may want to formally evaluate this project to a level that I would call research. The 1998-1999 academic year, however, was not that time. My objective was more immediate, to create a degree of order out of a situation that seemed overwhelming and on the verge of disintegration. Under the circumstances I did not possess any clear idea of what a teacher research project based on the grant would look like at this time or could conceive of what value it would serve.

With the CASAS/EFF curriculum "dead" as a teacher research project, the very purpose of my enrollment in the NCSALL initiative became opaque. I might find something else, but without a powerful motivational impetus driving me, I felt that I would only be engaging in an exercise that I did not particularly need, what I referred to as "grasping at straws." I summarized some of my concerns about the particular project focus to our NCSALL facilitator:

> From: GDEMETRION Date: Tue, 15 Dec 1998: Re: A Project
>
> The biggest dilemma here is how foreign the EFF concept is to the expectations of our ABE instructors who have been hired to implement the curriculum as part of our housing

grant. The distance between the curriculum frameworks I've been trying to implement and the reality of the classroom are vast, I don't know what we have in terms of a project to say nothing of a practitioner inquiry project.

My challenge right now seems to really bear down and provide some really pronounced structure which violates so many cannons of participatory literacy education. Without that, though, the ABE instructors are reverting to workbooks and math. The fundamental issue is to provide enough of a bridge to instructors that they have something consistent to work with. They're not going to prepare and whatever we can provide has to be within their framework to easily assimilate. And then I have the deadline of the grants and our credibility and future funding prospects are really on the line here.

So the only way that I can see it is to actually select the material for the ABE teachers - package it nicely and embed EFF principles in it. Remember, the alternative in CT is not a participatory/student-centered focus, but workbooks, fueled by a basic skills pedagogical assumption. Seen from Yankeeland, EFF is pretty progressive even as the literacy left remains skeptical - a skepticism I share to some degree.

So somehow the inquiry project needs to revolve around the creation and utilization of the materials. Instead of being restrictive, such scaffolding in Yankeetown provides the necessary bridging to enable particularly ABE teachers trained in traditional methodologies and assumptions of the public classroom teacher, the freedom and security to branch out into new areas.

Anecdote

I did some modeling teaching for one of the instructors. Her comments are "I see what you're doing and I know what you want me to do, but I don't know how to so it." The "it" was to stimulate some rather provocative discussion out of instructional material that might be viewed as somewhat banal.

So, I've got my work cut out for me, right and the first priority is to get the job done. Only when I feel I've made some headway there, does developing a P.I. project out of this slippery beast make sense.

George

**Searching for a New Project**

With no obvious project in hand, I began to question the viability of my participation in the NCSALL practitioner inquiry group. I had a full plate of interests and potential research projects that did not necessarily fit in with the set objectives of the NCSALL project. For my

participation to be personally viable, the NCSALL framework would need to fit into *my* broader research agenda. What did not make sense was to search for a project "on-site," to formally meet the requirements laid out by the NCSALL coordinators and designers that did not consume me as did the other work, described below, that moved well beyond the proscribed purpose of the Harvard-based research project.

I had worked at LVA national for about 20 months as Director of Materials Development in the Field Services Department. That position proved highly problematical both for my self and the LVA organization. In November 1997, my position was eliminated. There was much about that experience that I wanted to probe once I attained sufficient distance and time. It was not on my *immediate* calendar to tackle such a topic, but I viewed it as a long-range possibility. The experience at LVA permeated my current work as a perpetual subtext, which in some fashion or another, I would need to come to terms. With the disintegration of the CASAS/EFF project as a viable research topic, the prospect of writing about the LVA experience opened up. I had no doubt that it represented a valid teacher research project based on Cochran-Smith's definition of the genre, although it had much less to do with the themes of learner motivation, retention, and persistence. It also had little bearing on teaching, but much to do with the politics of literacy over the relationship between power and knowledge if compellingly probed and much to do with my *personal* sense of motivation. As I put it to Judy:

> By Jude, I think I've got it. I was at LVA national as Director of Materials Development for 20 months, from March 96-Nov. 97. One incredible experience about the cultural politics of the national organization as a microcosm of the broader politics of literacy in the USA.
>
> It is in the spirit of Cochran-Smith and Lytle in their category of teacher-research essays that I would like to do my project: an intense autobiographical essay about my experience at LVA national as part of a broader autobiographical narrative that I've constructed which will remain incomplete unless I have a "Syracuse" chapter.

I wrote a similar essay about my job as program manager at the Bob Steele Reading Center in Hartford called "Crossing Critical Thresholds at the Bob Steele Reading Center: Transforming Potentiality Into Actuality." That's part of a manuscript titled "Exploring the Middle-Ground: Literacy as Growth," currently under review at an academic press.

No doubt, mine is an idiosyncratic voice, but virtually everything I've written on literacy is a form of teacher-research, particularly given the liberality of definition proposed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle. The proposed essay would traverse considerable psychic and social space and would be something that I could finish in the 6 month framework of this project.

What does this have to do with Motivation, Retention, and Persistence? A lot indirectly I suppose, but that would certainly have to be teased out of the proposed essay. On the other hand, the project would have everything to do with teacher-research.

So that's what I purpose for my project. Already wrote a couple pages and can show you a bit on 11-20.
So, what thinkest thou?
George

While my proposal diverged from the project focus on learner motivation, retention, and persistence, perhaps it was not so counter to the broader objective of NCSALL to gain "an understanding of how and why adult basic practitioners and programs change as a result of their participation in staff development." Would a formal probing of my experience at LVA, Inc. have changed my practice and outlook at LVA-CRE? Perhaps this was so. The more immediate issue for me was whether there would be the flexibility in the NCSALL project to enable me to shift gears in the way I desired, or whether its set design needed to be maintained, regardless of whether I was motivated by it or not. No doubt, I was moving beyond the parameters and operative assumptions of the facilitator, who, after consulting with the project coordinators, preferred me to maintain my focus on some aspect of my current situation. Judy and I carried on an e-mail dialogue/debate of sorts. The following, which merges several of our e-mail discussions, represents the gist of her concerns as well as those of mine:

To: gdemetrion@juno.com

Date: Wed, 18 Nov 1998 10:56:16 EST
Subject: Re: A Project

George,

Here are some comments (for what they are worth) to your responses [J.T.]:

In a message dated 11/18/98 11:17:24 PM, you [being Judy] wrote:

How might doing this project change your practice? [J.T.]

Part of the question is: what is my practice; local administrator, consultant, contributor to NLA liststerv, academic writer in the field. [G.D.]

We were hoping for *teacher* but barring that, I think administrator will do nicely. [J.T.]

To summarize:

- Who gets hired for chief positions in our literacy organizations?
- Who makes the selection, how; and whose interests are served and represented in the decision?
- Why and what does it matter whether or not our agency chiefs have significant pedagogical knowledge? What is lost and gained as a result?
- Is it possible and what would it take for a more critical democratic review of the selection process?
- What counts as knowledge and power within our major literacy agencies?
- Who is empowered and who is marginalized as a result? [G.D]

These are great questions. Would you want to use these to frame your *research*? [J.T.]

I'll have to work on that. I may use the Bain Study and LVA's Strategic Plan for the immediate focus of this project. There is a lot there; key documents for LVA in the 90s. What these documents say, their relationship to one another and how they have been interpreted by key others is an important issue that without my study will be neglected for years if ever looked at all. I would have to sharpen a specific research question or two around them. [G.D.]

This is fine for LVA, but I really don't think it would be of interest to our research group. [J.T.]

Is there a way I can persuade you to stretch beyond your preferred processing style to include a bit of hands-on-direct-practice-mucking-around? [J.T.]

George, when I say direct-practice, I'm referring to working with students - either on the program level or classroom level. We've already established that that's not where you are

> right now, and that is fine. But I would like to encourage you to look at something of your own (administrative) practice in this process. My concern is that this piece you are doing not become too academic. Not that academic is *bad* - it just that this is billed as practitioner research. It's about reflection/action on practice. [J.T,]
>
> And, or course, how does it relate to LMRP? (Learner Motivation, Retention, Persistence) [J.T]

The proposed LVA project was perhaps, overly broad, nothing I could have completed in a few months, and not within the framework of the NCSALL project coordinators' expectations, although it did represent an important focus area I wanted to probe. Once the CASAS/EFF project fizzled, I began to view some aspect of my odyssey at LVA, Inc., related both to the politics of literacy at LVA and the social psychology of one practitioner researcher, as a worthy undertaking. Such a historical reconstruction grounded in personal experience, seemed much more compelling to me than designing a research project based on my experience at LVA-CRE simply to meet the formal requirements of the NCSALL project.

With much reluctance, I agreed to try to work within the constraints of the NCSALL project, but my heart was not in it. In fact, I did complete an essay titled, "Career Passages at LVA: Seeking Influence in Field Services" (Demetrion, 1999a) that I sent to the Adult Basic Education Journal which decided that the topic matter was not appropriate for them. As indicated by the abstract (below), I viewed the essay as a legitimate piece of teacher research. However, based on my discussions with Judy, I assumed that the NCSALL project team would view it as not germane to their stated project, whether or not they might interpret it as a form of 'legitimate" teacher research.

> *Abstract*
>
> The author reflects on critical factors that underlie his career shift from program manager of a local LVA affiliate to a position of Director of Materials Development at the national office. The personal narrative is laced with critical observations on the LVA network at the affiliate, state agency, and national organizational level. As autobiography, the author acknowledges important limitations related to "objectivity," but in the spirit of

> practitioner inquiry, the research design is grounded in a certain "systematic and intentional, inquiry" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993, p. 7). As such, this essay reflects an "emic view that is different from that of an outside observer, even if that observer assumes an ethnographic stance and spends considerable time in the classroom" (p. 18). From such an "emic" (insider's) perspective, the author seeks to disclose certain important aspects on the relationship between knowledge, organizational development, and the quest for legitimization within a national adult literacy network as well as something of the social psychology of an individual practitioner researcher.

I believe there were at least two reasons why the project team may have viewed this topic as not appropriate to the NCSALL initiative. The first was the apparent lack of relevance to learner motivation, retention, and persistence. The second was the historical focus which may not have been viewed as germane to my "here and now." Yet it is almost axiomatic that teacher research is often accompanied by unintended consequences, that "teaching moments" open up new areas of learning and should be encouraged rather than suppressed. I had a general motive to write such an essay, but the quest for a NCSALL generated topic, even one the coordinators did not view as relevant, served as the immediate stimulus for this effort. It is unlikely that I would otherwise have written the essay at the time. While historical rather than current in scope, the essay represented a significant exploration of issues that have comprised the organizational culture of LVA at the local, state, and national level as well as that of my personal psychology. Since this was the type of work that *did* motivate me, the NCSALL reluctance to accept such a piece as a viable alternative for someone immersed in teacher research for six years, further alienated me from the project. I might hunt for an acceptable project, but was not inspired by the methodological framework of the NCSALL initiative, which for me seemed more of an imposition than a source of empowerment. I am not arguing against the general validity of the project. I am simply making the point that for me to remain involved I would need to find a linkage that personally made sense regardless of its formal design. I am writing from the perspective of a participant rather than from that of the creators of the project, turning my

experience with it into my teacher research project.

It is not my argument, therefore, that the NCSALL reluctance to support my proposal was not based on sound reasoning stemming from the project's stated purposes. Although by emphasizing the importance of practitioner inquiry more than the specific topic of learner motivation, resistance, and persistence, a case could be made that the shift in focus I requested was legitimately grounded within the project's framework even if at its outer edge. Moreover, that without its impetus, I would not have written Career Passages at the time or perhaps ever. I would encourage the NCSALL project planners and developers of other research designs to consider such an unintended outcome as a manifestation itself of adult learner motivation and the need to remain open to "teaching moments" however and whenever they arise.

In addition to the Career Passages essay, I also completed another essay titled, "Competency-Based Adult Basic Education and the Post-Industrial Future: A Critical Perspective on the Connecticut Vision. The title was later changed to "The Post-Industrial Future and the Origins of Competency-Based Adult Education in Connecticut: A Critical Perspective" (Demetrion, 1999b). Initially, our NCSALL group discussed the possibility of a joint project on assessment with a critical eye toward the CT Bureau of Career and Adult Education's embrace of CASAS. That train of thought did not pan out, but it was a topic to which I had given much thought and ultimately addressed in a significant revision of an essay I had unsuccessfully written for publications several years previously. Although historically based, the essay is profoundly relevant in its critique of the CT Bureau's functional vision of adult basic education juxtaposed to the student-centered counter-model my colleagues and I developed at the Bob Steele Reading Center.

By December 1998, I had dropped my initial project and had written what I viewed as

two publishable essays that that were partially stimulated by my participation in the NCSALL project. Yet I did not have a viable topic that compelled much interest for *me* that would simultaneously satisfy the NCSALL project coordinators, whose perceptions I refracted from the expressed views of the facilitator's. Judy encouraged me to move outside my comfort zone and muck around with real data within the context of my current practice. I saw merit in what she was saying, but did not find it viable since I lacked a compelling topic upon which to base such data. I came close to abandoning the project on several occasions, but did not want to lose face or jeopardize my relationship with NCSALL or ATDN. Moreover, I felt obligated by the grant to remain with the project as it was not only I, but also two other grant participating colleagues who signed on for the NCSALL training. I also developed a personal bond with Judy that I did not want to impair. Yet I needed a sufficient sense of stability in my own programmatic situation before I could seriously tackle a viable on-site research project. So much in my daily work seemed in so much flux that I could not get hold of what I would call a local "real time" teacher research project that I felt would be worth the effort to undertake. However, I gave it one more try.

**David**

I began to tutor David in October 1998, a man about my age (50) who had been institutionalized at the Southbury Training School as a youth and obtained employment through the Easter Seals of Greater Hartford janitorial training program. I thought there might be an opportunity to do a project based on my work with David given the desire of this virtual non-reader to construct an autobiography, a genre that has also compelled me for many years. I laid it out to Judy:

I've been struggling quite a bit with this project concept and have given a lot of thought

to dropping it. I continue to edit and write academic papers on adult literacy and have a book manuscript under review at a couple of publishers. I do practice teacher research, but I'm clearly on the boundary (a boundary I like) between academic based and experientially driven research. I not only seek to draw on academic research to inform practice, but draw on practice to inform and refine theory. That's the niche that I've carved out and the only one that makes sense for me.

I've also been giving a lot of thought to working on learning theory as it applies to adult literacy. Currently, there is a dearth of such work. I could see a full book length manuscript on the topic at some time.

Here's what I propose. Drawing on my student David as a case study, I examine learning issues through the educational theories of John Dewey, Len Vygtosky, Scribner-Cole, Myron C. Tuman, Jerome Bruner, and Paulo Freire

These theorists along with a few others would be the main focus of a much longer-term project. So the initial work focusing on David would both provide an impetus for further exploratory efforts and be a topic that might appeal to the NCSALL project coordinators.

The proposed project affords an opportunity to reflect deeply both on practice and theory in relationship to adult literacy education. The topic (learning theory and practice) by its nature is highly relevant to the issues of motivation, retention and persistence. Perhaps this focus, both the present proposed essay and the larger research project might contribute to some of the longer range objectives of this NCSALL project.

In any event, this is what I propose, as loose as it currently is. For me to go forward with the practitioner inquiry group it is essential to find an angle that really works for me. I suggest that the learning theory framework does so as it is linked to some of my longer term research interests. This topic has not received wide attention in our field. I propose to attend to it and to begin with this initial essay.

Judy was quite receptive to the topic. Adult learning theory interests me much, but the kind of research I envisioned would take several years. I was unsure what I could accomplish on this topic in a few months time, but began to pursue it to see where it would lead. As a result, I was able to frame a fairly extensive problem statement, more or less verbatim, below:

**Statement of Problem**

David is a client of Community Enterprises, Inc. whose mission "is to support self-determination for people with disabilities by providing a set of resource options in a manner

deeply respectful of personal dignity." He is also employed by the Easter Seals Rehabilitation Center's contract cleaning business and attended school at Southbury Training School for the retarded. If David in fact has retardation, it is of a mild nature characteristic more of a "slow learner."

David was brought to our program by his social worker. I decided personally to work with David because I did not feel it would be appropriate for him to go through our regular matching process since it might be weeks before he obtained a tutor. I had an implicit sense that he had been jerked around various systems before and there was a certain immediacy to his need and desire to participate in the program. Moreover, a tutor working with David from a "deficit" perspective might reinforce perceived inadequacies David held about his learning self that could inhibit rather than expand the potential of what he might accomplish in a student-centered learning environment.

At an early age, David had been depicted as a special education student and likely dubbed as retarded since he was sent to Southbury Training School from age nine. He stayed there until he was about 18 and learned basic job skills and aptitudes that he has been able to apply throughout his life, although he had not acquired much capacity to read and write. Southbury had a profound impact on his life, both positive and negative. Much of what he wants to accomplish in our literacy sessions is to publicly articulate and critically reflect on his schooling experiences, which would be the focus of his first "book" (below).

At Easter Seals David received training in building services and cleans buildings for the agency's contract cleaning division. He is a steady and reliable worker and seeks opportunity for employment advancement. Recently, he was promoted and now cleans a building in Glastonbury on his own.

He and his wife who also apparently has "developmental disabilities" are working with their social worker to increase their independent living skills. They share an apartment and are receiving assistance in such areas as money management. Although one might find many "deficiencies" in David's life he did not want nor saw the need to focus his work with me on what is commonly characterized as "functional literacy." Instead of focusing on his "deficiencies" David wants to build his literacy program on the way he "reads the world." Echoing a similar refrain, Merrifield, Bingman, Hemphill, and deMarrais (1997, p.213) state that:

> The concept of functional literacy is flawed. Its definition is arbitrary, its measurement is problematic, and the phenomenon of "functioning in life" cannot be readily equated with literacy. Adults with limited literacy should be credited with the skills and knowledge that they do have. Educators should start to build on and extend this knowledge and skill, based on the needs, desires, and interests of the adult learners, rather than dwelling on measuring how "functional" a learner is or needs to become, according to standardized tests.

I cannot deny the role I play, unwitting or not, at least in reinforcing a certain direction toward autobiographical exploration that characterizes our work and I am clearly empathetic to the critique of functional literacy quoted above. Undoubtedly, my understanding of adult literacy education plays a significant role in influencing the pedagogical process that has developed between David and I. As Dewey put it, referring to school children:

> Everything the teacher does, as well as the manner in which he does it, incites the child to respond in some way or other, and each response tends to set the child's attitude in some way or another (Dewey, 1991, p. 47).

Regardless of how student-centered and "invisible" a tutor may attempt to be, it is inevitable that he or she will exert an influence, direct or indirect, on a student. While that may seem obvious, the more important point is that invariably, a teacher will imbue the teaching relationship with a certain set of values that will navigate the instructional setting in one

direction or another. It is equally important to acknowledge that the student will influence the teacher so that what emerges is a negotiated relationship. *How* that relationship unfolds and its significance as determined by both partners is the critical factor in determining its pedagogical value.

By inclination and experience I take an exploratory student-centered approach as a literacy tutor. Moreover, I am highly partial to autobiographical narratives, although include much else in my general teaching related to the interests of the specific students with whom I work. I have to be careful, at times, not to impose my personal preferences on students. When a certain congruity develops between a student and me, I need always to think through the extent to which my values are shaping the instructional relationship. I particularly wonder whether my value system is impeding other kinds and ways of learning that might be of value to a student that another instructor might bring out. Such a concern will not be the main focus of this essay, but comprises one of its subtexts just below the surface and will occasionally intrude directly upon the text.

David and I began working in October 1998. I didn't have any specific direction to follow, but sensed the path would emerge through discussion. In our first session, likely, with some prompting from me (I wasn't taking notes then), David articulated his goal in a language experience narrative titled:

**My Book**

> I want to write a book about me. I go to work everyday at the I.R.S. I talk to my coworkers. Some people will talk to you and get a conversation going.
>
> I promised this lady that one day I'll write this book. It's me, but I'm putting a different character in it so no one will get hurt.
>
> I just want to get a step ahead. If it comes out a seller that will be fine. If not I won' be hurt. I'll go a different way, that' all.

Since I have written fairly extensive autobiographical narratives and have edited many student-generated texts, a question in my mind is the extent and the nature to which I am influencing David in his focus. Regardless of the influence, the more important question is the extent to which this focus represents David's more compelling needs and desires in his emerging literacy. Both of these questions will be explored to some degree.

The main portion of the [proposed] essay goes to the composition process itself. What is this narrative that David is creating and how is it emerging? What are its intertextual components in terms of my own influence and those of the various student-generated texts from other literacy programs that he is reading. What contribution does compositional theory make toward better understanding the emerging process?

There are serious compositional issues to face. On the one hand, David states that he wants to write a best selling autobiography, clearly a daunting task for anyone. While on the other hand he seems to know that he may not achieve such an ambitious outcome, I am left wondering what is his "real" intent or if there is any "intent" beneath what he actually states. Since language is invariably a symbolic means of communication, I assume there is, but I do not want to assume *my* intent on what David means.

As our work continued, we have also drawn on other student narratives, the **Oakland Readers**, which David enjoys very much. As a discovery process, he began to read his own story through the narratives of others. The student narratives also established a virtual community for David that until he encountered those texts, he felt alone in his quest. Now he is bonded with a group of like-minded others who have also told their stories and had them published in books. There is, then, a modeling process that has taken place that provides much him with much vicarious satisfaction. Since David can also read the **Oakland Readers** Level

One series without too much difficulty, that series has the added advantage of helping him improve his basic skills and providing him with a sense of competency and mastery as a result. In addition, David reviews several of the texts and now chooses which ones he will read. Because the stories are not too difficult to read, he also skims them and can pick up the main point quite quickly. On several occasions he has accurately corrected me where I have misinterpreted the text or left something out that he picked up on.

In one sense the student narratives have complicated David's "autonomous" text construction. On the other hand, such texts have added important context and provided stylistic modeling that enabled him to better tell his story. The **Oakland Readers** may also help mediate what David interprets as a book that is a lot "simpler" that what I have in mind which could be part of my difficulty in interpreting David's goal as "reality-based." Still, the issue of creating a "seller" remains.

**Concluding Commentary on David**

The project with David was problematic on a number of counts, but, within the time constraints of the NCSALL initiative, a viable essay could have been written on the difficulties encountered in the very struggle between David and I to make meaning of our work together. In my effort to formulate a teacher research project, I veered back and forth between compositional theory and learning theory on the one hand, and the actual narratives David construed and read about on the other; a phenomenological approach that might eschew formal theory. In the radical decentering of theory and practice articulated by Cochran-Smith and Lytle, neither theory nor practice are privileged. In principle, therefore, I could start with either focus with the expectation of creating, ultimately, a blurred genre that identified something substantial about

David's learning trajectory. Because I aborted the essay at least for the purposes of the NCSALL project, I don't know precisely how, if at all, I would have resolved the countervailing pulls. I wanted to work with learning theory, in no small part because I desired to learn something substantial about *that*, but viewed the narratives David constructed and read as the logical and "authentic" place to start, with perhaps a sharper theoretical focus on compositional theory, particularly through the excellent text, **Beyond Communication: Reading Comprehension and Criticism** (Bogdan and Straw, 1990).

I would likely have kept probing until a direction "hit me," however idiosyncratic, perhaps; then would have pursued its logic doggedly until I stated as perfectly as I could what I wanted to say through the voice that I chose to speak, whether academic, existential, or some combination thereof. That is, I would have probed through the seemingly conflicting voices and sources of evidence (not merely data) until I found *my* voice through some inner connection between logic and emotion in working through the narrative of David, clearly a blurred research genre. Whether I would have gotten that far, is a counterfactual exercise that has no definitive answer. I know, however, almost to a certainty, that I would not have been satisfied unless I received and worked through the revelatory direction described above. Within the time constraints of the NCSALL project, David would not have written a book or even likely, a coherent narrative. This would have left me with the far from unimportant task of attempting to capture something of significance about the *process* with which both David and I were struggling, clearly a work in progress.

This was a worthy project that I have abandoned, at least for this time, for two reasons. First, I have a likely book prospect pending on my research at the Bob Steele Reading Center and I need to shift my focus to that effort. This essay is my attempt to seek closure on the NCSALL

project without abandoning it. Second, I linked David with a new tutor who may well take him down some new paths. Given the project's limited time constraints, adding a new person into the research design would further complicate an already messy project that I did not feel I could adequately address within the time constraints of the project.

**Concluding Remarks**

My involvement in the NCSALL Learner Motivation, Retention, and Persistence Practitioner Inquiry Staff Development Project had been a complicated affair. On the one hand it stemmed from the pragmatic necessity of writing the most competitive grant proposal that I could. On the other hand, from my previous work at LVA national I had gained an awareness of NCSALL and very much wanted to be a part of that initiative, but based on my own research purposes. Ideally, I wanted to find a match and viewed the teacher research project as an opportunity for such convergence. However, I sensed that my strong "intellectual" take on teacher research through the prism of Cochran-Smith and Lytle, might not jell well with the practitioner focus of the project. However divergent, perhaps was my interpretation of teacher research from those of the NCASALL project coordinators and facilitator, I maintain that this reflective essay as well as my professional essays on the Bob Steele Reading Center are legitimate forms of this emerging genre. Moreover, as evident in this essay, I take a more historical slant than reflective in much of the presentist bias of most teacher research. A historical perspective enables me to attain a level of stability over the subject matter in order to examine contemporary issues in the field, even as my contribution is not usually *directly* practical either to myself or to others. Whatever its limitations, a certain historical detachment enables me to make meaning of my practice even as it creates a certain distance from immediately pressing issues. I seemingly require such distance in order to think and write out of

my own space as a critical baseline for "authentically" engaging in dialogue with others.

It may be useful, finally, to imagine my odyssey through the NCSALL project as analogous to that of an adult literacy learner struggling with issues of motivation, retention, and persistence. Clearly, I am motivated by learning (literacy) and am an active creator of teacher research. Moreover, I am self-motivated, a value that resonates with the principles of participatory literacy education, and frequently feel constrained by institutional boundaries, which for me, often inhibit rather than enhance personal creativity. I participate in formal learning institutions to the extent that I can gain insight from and through them, but am primarily motivated to pursue my own voice and vision, particularly if institutional values conflict with these. What I truly seek is a synthesis, which I rarely, but occasionally find, for which I am searching in my own position at LVA-CRE. I did not find that synthesis with the NCSALL project, in no small part because I could not make any *compelling* attachment to it.

Given so much else to pursue, without an abiding sense of identification to the NCSALL initiative, I was unable to sustain a sense of commitment to undertake a practitioner-based research project that would have satisfied the normative expectations of the facilitator and the project coordinators. That lack of attachment was compounded when my own research efforts, which clearly moved outside the main boundaries of the NCSALL project, were viewed by the facilitator as not appropriate to the work at hand. The mucking around with real data that Judy wished for me to undertake seemed like small compensation. If I have found my voice at all in this project it is in this essay and the companion piece "Practitioner-Based Inquiry: Theoretical Probings (Demetrion, 2000), a more theoretical essay.

A critical issue is whether this socially marginal, but intellectually acute teacher researcher has the right to challenge the operative assumptions of the NCSALL project

designers, to transform their purposes for the project, at least as it has applied to my own participation. Working analogically, do adult literacy learners have the right to challenge the operative assumptions of programs that seek to serve them in order to meet their own learning needs which may or may not conform to program directives? That is an open question worthy of much reflection. While a convergence is what I sought, I am primarily motivated by the questions and issues that absorb *me*, which did not seemingly converge with the overt goals of the NCSALL project coordinators or designers at least as I internalized them through my interaction with Judy.

I doubt that I have extended beyond my comfort-zone as Judy desired for me, although working through this project challenged me. I do know that in writing this essay, and the more scholarly companion piece (Demetrion, 2000), I sought to find and express my voice and to authenticate my experience without which any teacher research project would prove meaningless. If I have connected with others in this effort, I will be able to interpret my participation in the project as a worthy endeavor. I sought to find and establish my *own* authorial voice through this project. Yet it is only through the response of *readers* that discourse can take place in the promotion of learning environments where "free social inquiry is indissolubly [sic] wedded to the art of full and moving communication" (Dewey, 1927, p. 284).

## REFERENCES

Alamprese, J. A. (1993). *Systematizing adult education: Final evaluation report of the Connecticut Adult Performance Program (CAPP).* Washington, D.C.: Cosmos Corporation.

Archambault, R.D. (ed.) (1964). *John Dewey on education: Selected writings.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Berthoff, E. (1987). The teacher as researcher. In D. Goswami & P.R. Stillman (Eds.), *Reclaiming the classroom: Teacher research as an agency for change.* Upper Montclair, NJ:

Boynton/Cook.

Bogdan, D. & Straw, S.B. (Eds.) (1990). *Beyond communication: Reading comprehension and criticism*. Portmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Heinemann.

Cochran-Smithe, M. and Lytle, S.L (1993). *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge*. New York. Teachers College Press.

Demetrion, G. (1999a) "Career passages at LVA: Seeking influence in Field Services". Unpublished paper.

Demetrion, G. (1999b). "The post-industrial future and the origins of competency-based adult education in Connecticut: A critical perspective." Adult Basic Education, 9, 123-148

Demetrion, G. (2000). Practitioner-based inquiry: Theoretical probings." Accepted for publication in ABE

Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems*. Atens, OH: Swallow Press.

Dewey, J. (1991). *How we think*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.

Merrifield, J. (1998). *Contested ground: Performance accountability in adult basic education*. Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.

Merrifield, J., Bingman, M.B., Hemphill, D. amd Bennett deMarrais, K.P. (1997). *Life at the margins: Literacy, language, and technology in everyday life*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Quigley, B.A. (1997). *Rethinking literacy education: The critical need for practice-based change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Stein, S.G. (1997). *Equipped for the future: A reform agenda for adult literacy and lifelong learning*. Washington, D.C.,National Institute for Literacy.

Tracy-Mumford, F. (1994). *Student retention: Creating student success*. National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium, Inc.